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GATHERED TO SHARE THE STORY

VOLUME 26 NUMBER 3 APRIL 2013

An important part of living out our faith is sharing it with others. How do we learn to tell the story?

6 Angels Among Us Easter is about making old things new. Susan Flemr

12 With Fresh Eyes Learn about this ELCA deaconess who serves as a missionary in Indonesia through

ELCA global mission. Megan Ross

16 Telling the New Story What we tell, and how we tell it shapes our view of the world. Anne Basye

22 Jonah, Justin Bieber, and Me How is God working through even the most mundane and exasperating days of

your life? Meghan Johnston Aelabouni

26 Cloud of Witnesses This writer experiences God's grace mediated through a website as she goes

through treatment for cancer. Deanna A. Thompson

36 A Moveable Faith Sometimes in the life of faith, experience and a fresh interpretation of God's word

bring change. Brooke Petersen

DEPARTMENTS

4 Voices We Love to Tell the Story Terri Lackey

5 Give Us This Day The English Lady Christine Techky

8 Let Us Pray Shelter of God's Wings Julie K. Aageson

10 Family Matters Music Lessons Elyse Nelson Winger

20 Earth Wise Rooms of Contemplation Catherine Pate

30 Bible Study Session 8 Storytelling

Gathered by God The missionary stories of Paul and Barnabas remind us that God works through us

to convey the good news of Jesus Christ to the world. Audrey West

41 Grace Notes Is 10 Percent Enough? Linda Post Bushkofsky

42 Amen! Blessed Change Catherine Malotky

PLUS ...

43 Directory of Reader Services

Subscription, editorial, and advertising information

gathermagazine.org



VOICES

We Love to Tell the Story

by Terri Lackey

Since I could hold a

pencil, I have put stories on paper; it's always proven to be a good way to process my feelings. When I was a kid and our family dog, Napoleon, died, I wrote a story about it: "Poly got creamed by a milk truck." My elderly, near-blind dog loved to chase cars, and the last one he ever pursued was the milk truck. (Mind you, this was long before dogs were confined in yards by fences and given miniature couches on which to lounge.)

I've worked for newspapers and told other people's stories. I've told my own story about my bout with colon cancer on a blog. Now my vocation allows me to edit stories by others who graciously agree to share the good news of Jesus Christ through this magazine.

In "Storytelling," Session 8 of our Bible study this month, Audrey West writes, "Whether one is on the telling end or the hearing end, stories are a great way to share experiences with others, introducing them to people and events they may not have experienced for themselves."

Meghan Johnston Aelabouni tells a story about parenting—something I have never experienced. In it, she details how God works through even the most mundane and exasperating days of her life. In "Jonah, Justin Bieber, and Me," she writes, "I suspect that many of us, in the 'mission field' of our lives, may ask ourselves: Is what I do important? Does my life matter...? These questions can be powerful and faithful, if we ask them in the context of discerning the vocations

to which God has called us. The problem comes when we attempt to define and evaluate our lives and vocations by contrasting them with others' lives and vocations."

Anne Basye is a storyteller who advocates equality when discussing ministry and vocation. She is into truth telling, not back-patting when talking about mission work. In "Telling the New Story," she offers tips about how to tell stories in a way that focuses less on the work of the church and more on the lives and gifts of the other.

Sometimes, we have to share stories about ourselves to lift up and encourage others. In "Cloud of Witnesses," Deanna Thompson writes about her Stage IV cancer diagnoses and how through the Caring Bridge website (a site that connects people with a serious illness to those who care about them), she is sur rounded by love.

"...Through this cancer journey, I've been awakened to a new-indeed, almost mystical-understanding of the church universal, mediated through what I've come to call the virtual body of Christ that is, the body of Christ incarnated in with, and through the power of sites like Caring Bridge."

As we move through the Easter season, let us celebrate the stories of our own cloud of witnesses: loved ones who brought us into the faith, friends and family who have gone before and are awaiting resurrection, and Jesus, whose powerful story makes all things new.



VE US THIS DAY

he English ady

Christine Techky

When the alarm rang,

I was already awake. I hardly slept worrying that I would oversleep and miss my flight home to the United States. This was the last night that I would spend in the house where I grew up as a child, and where my father had died three weeks earlier.

At 4 a.m. the taxi pulled up. As we drove away, I looked back at the house and I sobbed. It felt like the most miserable morning of my life. I am a Christian who turns to God daily for help, but looking back at that morning, I have to admit that I was so engrossed in my own loss, I did not think to ask God for comfort or peace.

I was born and raised in Manchester, England, but have lived in the United States for more than 30 years. I always looked forward to my annual trip home. After my mother died eight years ago, I visited the sad and lonely figure that my father had become.

I got to the airport at 4:45 a.m., dreading the long, lonely plane journey. As I prepared to leave the city of my birth, I believed it would be the last time I would see it. Now that I had lost both parents, the city held no joy for me. The only memories that morning were ones of sorrow.

The airport was quiet. I went through the check-in process, not feeling like smiling or talking to anyone. As I put my luggage on the scale, I heard a loud voice nearby. It was a middle-aged, English woman checking in at the next counter. I heard her say that she had not traveled abroad for many years, and she was obviously anxious. I walked away; I just wanted to be quiet and alone in my sadness.

As I walked through the terminal looking for a place to have a cup of tea, I heard footsteps behind me. It was the woman from the check-in counter, hurrying to catch up with me. She asked if I was also on the Frankfurt flight and I replied that I was. She then wanted to know where she could buy a cup of tea, and I said that I was also looking for tea. She asked if she could join me, and I reluctantly agreed.

She told me how flying had changed and how nervous she felt. I wanted to be alone, but she talked and talked, seemingly oblivious to my misery. At some point, though, she made me laugh.

We were not seated together on the flight, but after we deplaned, she caught up with me. Before saying goodbye, I said, "We've been together for the past four hours and I don't even know your name." She smiled, shook my hand, and said, "Angela. My name is Angela." Then she disappeared into the crowd.

And it struck me-like it might not have if her name had been Lucy or Jane. I realized that God sent an angel to help me through one of the most difficult days of my life. After that, the flight didn't seem so lonely because I knew that I was not alone. I never had been, but it had taken an Angela to make me understand.

Christine Techky is a retired editor who has worked for *British Heritage* and *American History* magazines. She is a member of Zion's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jonestown, Pa.

ANGELS AMONG US

by Susan Flemi

Lucy could stay in her basement apartment until she died, her friend Brother Ed reassured me. The Chicago Housing Authority had condemned her building. Rats and cockroaches had taken the upper hand and the absentee landlord hadn't put up a fight. Brother Ed told the building inspector that Lucy was the only one left there,

but she didn't have long to live. "Well, as long as she's out by May, it should be okay," the inspector reluctantly conceded. We didn't tell Lucy about the notice.

A bulldozer would raze the three-story brownstone from the deteriorated block. Lucy and Brother Ed, both in their 80s, were among the few who remained in this neighborhood of vacated residences. Brother Ed confided that his apartment building across the street had also been condemned and he would need to move as soon as Lucy was gone. Those buildings had been home for Lucy, Ed, and their late spouses for more than 40 years.

I was her visiting nurse during these last months of Lucy's life, and I saw her daily to provide injections for pain and assistance with other care. The cancer was spreading quickly. Brother Ed changed Lucy's pillowcase each day and helped me lift and turn her as I bathed her. He cared for the parakeet that chattered away in a cage near her bed. He carried her soiled linen three blocks to the laundromat on Mondays and Thursdays and scrubbed her cracked linoleum floors daily, placing newspaper over the cracks that continually expelled gooey soot. This had been Lucy's routine and he realized its importance.

One morning Lucy announced, "This is Good Friday. Do you know that Nurse Sue?" She groaned as I

carefully rolled her over to give her shot into the tiny bit of muscle left in her buttocks.

"Yes, I know."

Lucy's dark skin was a stark contrast to the bleached white sheets of her double bed in the center of her sparsed ly furnished yet immaculate living room. A white flannels gown worn thin from frequent bleaching hung loosely over her bony frame. Her balding head, usually covered with a bright colored scarf, sunk deeply into the pillow and seldom moved. Despite the relentless pain inflicted by the cancer now in her bones, Lucy smiled nearly continuously. She frequently reminded me that her brilliant white teeth were her own.

"I keep thinking about how much I'd like to be income my little church on Easter," she said. "Every year I'd wear my best white dress, my fancy white hat, white polished shoes, white gloves, and George—that's my late husband—and I would walk to church. It's my favorite day."

Gifts of the heart

I was on-call nurse for the Easter holiday weekends only those patients requiring daily visits would be seen. On Saturday I saw six other patients before Brother Economic greeted me at Lucy's door. "She's been anxious to give you something," he said. I removed my coat, placed it over a chair, put down my nursing bag, and went directly to her bedside.

Lucy omitted her usual perfunctory greetings. Instead she reached out and grabbed my hand.

"I only own two things that I have to make sure will get good care when I'm gone." Lucy used every bit of her energy to raise her head from the pillow. "One is my little parakeet, Tweety. Brother Ed is going to take care of him for the rest of his life. The other is wrapped in terry cloth towel in the center drawer of my vanity in the bathroom. Please go and get that, Nurse Sue."

She squeezed my hand, dropped it, and directed motoward the tiny bathroom behind a drape that separated

from the living room. I moved quickly, opened the nity drawer, found and carried the weighty towelcapped item to Lucy.

"Well, go on and open it. It's the most beautiful thing ever owned. I want you to take it home with you."

I unwrapped the towel to find an antique silveroated hand mirror with beveled glass, its handle in the oape of an angel cherub. The silver was extremely tarshed but the beauty of the object shone through.

"Let me tell you how I got that." Lucy spoke as if membering. "It was given to me by the lady I worked years for in a fancy Lake Shore Drive apartment. She d her husband moved to California when he retired. fore they left she told me I could have anything on r dressing table. There were all kinds of fancy silver ings: bottles, mirrors, and boxes."

Lucy stopped speaking for a few moments and I new she was gathering strength to go on. "I chose that because of the angel. I told her it would help me think heavenly things when days got hard."

As Lucy talked, Brother Ed turned away from the edside, walked toward the door and blew his nose, weety chattered in his cage and repeatedly banged his the bell. I grasped the mirror and looked down into the flection of my own tear-filled eyes.

"Now, don't give me any argument," Lucy said, recause I know you aren't supposed to take gifts. But I red to know you will take this one because it's so prepus to me and I have no family."

d made new

rewrapped the mirror and placed the mirror next to y coat on the chair.

In the bathroom I filled a gray metal basin with ater. When I returned to Lucy's bedside I found her res closed and a slight smile across her lips. The room as quiet. Tweety perched silently in his cage. Lucy's ands were folded on her chest. I placed the basin on the bedside table, dried my hands on my uniform skirt,

and gently covered her hands with mine. A few moments passed. Without opening her eyes, she whispered, "Thank you."

At home that evening I used polish to bring back the mirror's lovely shine and the fine details of the cherub's form were revealed. The next morning I returned to see Lucy. The air was crisp, the sun shone—a perfect day for Easter.

Brother Ed answered the door and shook his head ominously as I asked about Lucy's condition. From across the tiny room I could see how much she had weakened as she tried to raise her head to greet me.

After removing my coat, I took the towel-wrapped mirror from my bag. At her bedside I stood quietly until her eyes opened. As I deliberately unwrapped the towel to allow the bright silver to appear, Lucy's face transformed from one practiced at stoically hiding pain with a forced smile to one expressing genuine joy.

"Now I have my Easter. Now I have my Easter," Lucy exclaimed. "You see, it's all about making old things new! That's what it's about. Just like this old mirror, we are made brand new. Lift me up so I can look at myself in that mirror."

I slid my arm under her back, raising her up off the bed. Her body felt light and her backbones distinct against my arm. She peered eagerly into the mirror. "Now, just look at those teeth, so bright! They're all mine." I lowered her gently back onto her pillow.

Early the following day I stepped off the bus at 63rd Street to find Brother Ed waiting for me. It was cold on that early April morning and I could see his brimming eyes behind his steamy breath. He looked up at me and touched my sleeve. "Well, Nurse Sue, you don't need to be going down to our friend Lucy's today. I've already got Tweety bird over at my place. Should you and I maybe go someplace and grab a cup of coffee?"

The Rev. Susan Flemr was ordained at age 58 after a fulfilling career in nursing. She has served churches in Iowa and Arkansas, and is enjoying writing and living with her husband, Bill, in Fairfield Bay, Ark.



LET US PRAY

Shelter of God's Wings

by Julie K. Aageson

Anne Lamott is one of

my favorite writers. She's a truth-teller: irreverent, funny, someone who knows that life can be filled with torturous challenges. I will never forget the images in her book, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, describing her experience of becoming a Christian.

I use these words—"becoming a Christian"—cautiously. Sometimes there is an off-putting piety about them that feels self-righteous. But Lamott is anything but pious. And despite earlier encounters with Christians and Christianity that have left a bad taste, she writes eloquently about being pursued by God and embraced by Christianity.

Her bohemian life of broken relationships, addictions, and an empty search for meaning careen out of control until one day, everything comes unraveled. In the tormented darkness of physical and mental anguish and drug and alcohol dependency, Lamott imagines the presence of a little cat. She knows this presence to be Jesus, waiting without intruding to offer comfort, healing, acceptance, and unconditional love—the shelter of God's wings.

What should not be amazing is that Lamott finds a small church in Marin City, Calif., where all 23 members embrace and welcome her. Embodying the love of Christ and seeing in her their own brokenness and frailty, they welcome her "home" and provide a shelter for her, a respite from the chaos of her life. They welcome her to a community, to a place where all are welcome, a place devoted to caring for others.

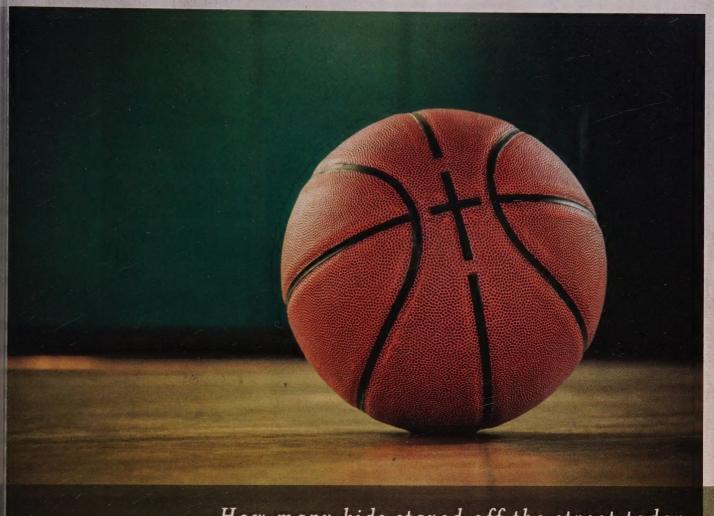
Now many years later, Lamott still writes regularly about St. Andrew's Church. It's a place of shelter for her because she has found in its people a God of mercy and love, a God who saves us from ourselves and calls each of us to make a difference in the world.

Lamott goes to St. Andrews because she encounters a living God in that place. She describes St. Andrews as a kind or safe house, an anchor in the storm, a refuge. It serves as a compass and a lens for wending her way through life.

On occasional Sunday mornings when I am tempted to worship at altars of my own, I think about our common need for community and the shared graces of word, water, wine, and bread. I am reminded of the body of Christ that is about the we and the us rather than the I and the me. I remember how clearly we all need places of mercy, reminders of forgiveness and healing, grace.

Lamott went to church twice last Sunday. She doesn't share this to sound churchy or pious. She tells us because church is where she finds real food, living water, hope, and shelter from the storms that plague us all. She celebrated having been at church because she meets Christ there. In the company of the body of Christ, she finds ways of seeing Christ in herself and others, and of being Christ to the chaotic world all around us. Market it be so for us as well.

Julie K. Aageson is coordinator of ELCA Resource Centers and director of the Resource Center for the Eastern North Dakota Synod. She is a member of Bethesda Lutheran Church in Moorhead, Minn



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FAMILY MATTERS

Music Lessons

by Elyse Nelson Winger

My stomach staccatos,

my hands sweat, I shift in my folding chair. I feign calm, smile encouragingly, repeat to myself: This will be over in 40 minutes. Actually, less: Daniel is sixth, Catherine is eleventh. It will be 20 minutes max. Buck up, Elyse. It's just a piano recital.

I'm getting better, seven years into Sunday afternoon recitals in a stuffy attic hall where students shuffle to the Steinway grand and give it their best shot. I'm less sick to my stomach less often, better able to enjoy the music so sincerely offered by girls and boys, young women and men. And I am charmed by Catherine and Daniel whose performance anxiety pales in comparison to my audience fretting.

Recital after recital, they demonstrate age-appropriate proficiency that is a testament to their teacher, their own strong wills, and just plain talent.

I am happy for them, because I want them to love playing the piano as much as I do, to see it as a community-maker and a soul-soother. I want them to have confidence in a skill that is years in the making, that requires consistency and commitment, that has power to unleash emotion.

And frankly, I want for them to be able to play hymns, maybe even give the organ a try. I'm old school. I cannot tell a lie.

It was comical: Chubby fingers colliding on the piano keyboard, extending from paws more than hands, learning to play *Circus Clown*. The boy could barely

hold a pencil when we first cracked operation. "Time to Begin" and I remember sitting at the piano bench, sweet-talking my first-grader into practicing 10 minutes and day with promises of a 30-minute show an ice-cream bar, extra computer time. I peruse his first piano book today and smile at the hand-written As and Csi whole notes and circled clefs.

I guffaw (seriously, there's no better word) at the title Daniel has given to his favorite made-up piece in Unit 2: "Mom losing her keys." Of course, he didn't yet get the clever irony of this title as he repeated three black keys both *forte* and piano. All he knew was that I repeated: refrain most mornings, combing countertops and coat pockets, shouting up to Stewart, muttering madly to myself Where are my keys? Already, Danie was learning that music told stories and expressed feelings.

Four years later, those adorable paware morphing into strong boy hands that love to grip a hockey or drum stick catch a football and sometimes even hand write a report. And they even delight in playing beginning Bach. This is a new development, begun in whispers to his teacher: "What's the easiest Back piece I could learn?" With a sister whose recital repertoire has now included Two-Part Inventions, the competitive gents was surely in play.

I'm not sure Daniel would use the language of delight to describe his interest in mastering *Minuet in G Major*. But that's what I see as I watch him practice his fingering, complete with crossovers,

3 mouth twisted in concentration. Just n't tell him that. You see, Daniel s an off-and-on relationship with the no. Many a hot tear has been shed in the piano bench with head-in-hands st hurled onto the keyboard then ted upward toward awful parents cruel lough to make a young boy practice. hate piano! It's stupid. You can't make æ play."

Turns out, I could, but I had to up se ante. Ice cream treats and moratorins on iCarly no longer cut it.

Promises of lifelong enjoyment along ith proof in our own daily playing and nging didn't count. The "We're a famwho makes music; you're so lucky ou get to play piano!" speeches fell on eaf ears.

Finally, only ultimatums would do. bu know that hockey league you love to ay in? That baseball team? They only appen if piano happens. End of story. , let's work on Dreadful Dragon.

Does this make me a Dragon Mom? hope so, if it's the kind of parent escribed by Gloria Pan at www.mom ising.org: "Dragon Moms may do our are of math drills, late-night homeork checks, and incessant nagging bout music practice, but not in the ursuit of glory for the sake of glory (to e the most admired, the most awarded, le 'best'). Two things motivate us: high andards and a sense of responsibility to take a difference." For me, this sounds ke an understanding of vocation.

I have experienced music-makingspecially at the piano-as a calling of its

own, bringing people together, supporting congregational singing, soothing my own sometimes stressed-out and heartsick soul.

I believe that making music is one of the things that makes us most human and most connected to one another.



Music is not about fame or fortune. It's not about being served. It's all about the privilege to serve.

I am pretty sure that Daniel is counting on being able to quit piano when he's 16, which I think I may have promised him one contested evening. But, I'm hoping he's permanently smitten by then and that he'll have come to see those ebonies and ivories as an unparalleled way to tell his own stories, express his emotion, live his faith, bring people together ... and even win a date. 🦇

The Rev. Elyse Nelson Winger, an ELCA pastor, serves as University Chaplain at Illinois Wesleyan University in Bloomington, III. She and husband, Stewart, have two children, Catherine and Daniel, who are in elementary school.



Megan Ross is an ELCA missionary serving as an English teacher at the HKBP Deaconess School of the Huria Kristen Batak Protestan (HKBP), the Batak Christian Protestant Church of Indonesia. HKBP is a member church of the Lutheran World Federation. The church has 4.1 million members and it just celebrated its 150th anniversary. The deaconess school is located in the city of Balige, at the southern end of the great Lake Toba in a valley created by an ancient volcano, on the island of North Sumatra. As a deaconess herself, Megan is an inspiration as she walks with other young women committing their lives to faith and service in Christ.

priliza enthusiastically took my arm to guide me across the busy streets through the market. She asked, "Sister, is the market in your country like this?"

At that point, I had only been in Indonesia for two months, so we both had fresh eyes to look upon each other. I struggled to answer. My attention was elsewhere—at my feet as I looked for potholes, trash, and other obstacles—and beside me, careful of the cars, motorbikes, and people. We passed piles of dried fish next to a seller of toiletries next to a table of fruit.

Amidst the cacophony, I answered, "Yes ... but no."

My hometown of Seattle has Pike Place Market and other farmers' markets in the neighborhoods, but the bustling activities around me were very different than anything I could've encountered there.

While the other students in our group stopped to

North America to Apriliza. I told her that most people in the United States buy their food in supermarket: with special sections of produce, aisles of pre-packaged goods, and instant food, all lined in neat rows.

Here in rural Sumatra, the outdoor traditional market is the lifeblood of the people. There are sellers every day, but the traditional market occurs once a week, spilling out into the streets where, among an assortment of items used for daily life, one can buy rice, fish, fruit, vegetables, and meat.

As we walked along together, arm-in-arm through the bustling streets, Apriliza shifted our conversation. She said, "So many poor people in Indonesia." There she asked, "How about in your country, Sister?"

This question was difficult to answer. Where should I start? Briefly, I acknowledged the rising

Imber of poor people and reflected on a few of the rvices from the government, non-profit organizations, and churches that provide for the poor. There were too any distractions in the market to carry on an in-depth onversation about culture—we would have more time in that later—but the brief exchange at the market was an important step in learning about culture for us both.

VFE WITH THE STUDENTS

phow my students outside of the classroom. Sometimes to be go to the market or I help them chop vegetables for anner. They are always happy to teach me new words Bahasa Indonesia and Batak languages.

On weekdays there are student-led morning and vening worship services, and they work hard at studyg, cooking, and cleaning, with little free time. They
e constantly singing, as they begin class and do their
sks. On the weekends they minister in various ways,
cluding at the hospital, in the prison, with children,
and with the elderly. And at the end of their three years
study, they face a series of oral examinations admintered by their teachers and even the *ephorus* (bishop).

My students come from poor families. Some have lorked very hard to help their parents afford school es for their siblings so they can have an education. Iost are from North Sumatra, and almost all of them re ethnic Bataks. Some are from an orphanage and thers have one parent already dead, usually the father.

In spite of the hardships in their lives at home and at 'hool, these young women are strong in their faith and re bearers of infectious smiles, radiating the love of God their activities, however great or small. And in spite f the many differences between us, we share a common alling to serve God's people, wherever there is need.

MINISTRY OF PRESENCE

Occasionally I go out with the students to their minisries. One day, only a month after my arrival, in a village near Pematang Siantar (two hours from Balige), I joined with Arlisna in her ministry to the elderly. She walked to the houses of the grandmothers and called them for Sunday worship. In all, there were about a dozen older women, who are called *oppung* (grandmother in Batak).

We sat on the floor and Arlisna led a simple service of a few hymns, a Scripture reading, and a short devotion. The women, who are unable to walk the distance to the local church, would otherwise not have worship.

I was welcomed into their midst with laughter and smiles. Some of them had never before met an American, so my presence among them was special. After worship, Arlisna translated our conversation between Batak and English, as we shared tea and bread.

When we had finished, Arlisna invited me to her home in a nearby village. I greeted her mother with "Horas" and shook her hand then touched my heart in the customary manner. Together with Arlisna's mother, two sisters, brother-in-law, and infant nephew, I sat on the floor, using my hands to eat rice, tofu, and fried noodles. This is typical of family life in North Sumatra.

After our meal, Arlisna's mother led me to see her rice field. Arlisna then took me to see her father's grave. It was a peaceful moment in the sweltering afternoon heat. Scanning the hills, villages, and fields that surrounded us, I thought that to visit a grave would be considered private in my own culture, but not so in this place.

The day after meeting Arlisna's family, I found myself sitting in another house in a different village. This time, it was the home of Sister Delviana, a deaconess and teacher at the deaconess school. Her mother had died a few days before, and as a sister deaconess, I was there to view the body.

I greeted everyone with a handshake as I entered the home. A thin veil covered the body, laid in an open coffin placed in the middle of the room. Family and people from the village sat on the floor around the coffin and discussed how they would make the funeral party according to their customs. Like a wedding party, the funeral party of an old person includes killing a pig to make *saksang*, a dish of minced pork cooked in blood, coconut milk, and other spices.

It was a stirring moment for me—the moment of being present for my sister deaconess, juxtaposed with a moment of remembering death and its rituals in my own culture. Twenty years to the day after I laid my grandmother to rest, here I was in the presence of another grandmother who had died.

My grandma had been a strong woman of faith and a teacher. She would be proud of me for being a missionary and teacher. Sometimes I remember her when I'm in the classroom, helping my students grapple with pronouncing the "th" sounds or teaching grammar through a game.

I took my dinner outside under the stars. Diana, one of my students, was with me. She pointed to the houses beyond the yard. "My house is over there, Sister." I couldn't help but reflect on my experiences with both happiness and longing to see my own home, too.

MISSION IS ACCOMPANIMENT

As I read in the book of Acts of the missionary stories of Apostle Paul, I'm reminded of how Christianity spread among the Batak tribes. Ludwig Ingwer

Nommensen of the German Rhenish Missionary Society came to North Sumatra in 1861. He spoke Batak and completed a Batak translation of the New Testament.

Nommensen's efforts, like Paul's journeys, laid the foundation for faith. Now more than 150 years after Nommensen's missionary journey, the Huria Kristen Batak Protestan, the largest of the Batak churches, is a thriving denomination of more than 4 million members.

come to their country, I answer that my presence here is because of a relationship between the HKBP and the ELCA. The deaconess school asked for a native English speaker, and here I am. This is a small piece of what the ELCA calls accompaniment, or "walking together in solidarity that practices interdependence and mutuality."

In the walk of accompaniment, being a missionary isn't based just upon knowledge passed down from meaning the series of the english speaker.

When the Indonesians I meet ask me why I have

In the walk of accompaniment, being a missionary isn't based just upon knowledge passed down from measurement is a walk of mutuality and empowerment. Therefore, my ministry is not only in the classroom, but it is also to journey alongside my students during their formation as servant ministers.

When I think about accompaniment, I recall my stories—walking through the market, eating with Arlisna's family, ministering to the elderly, visiting Sister Delviana after her mother's death, and many other stories I'm not able to share in this article.

The road isn't easy. Like my walk with Apriliza in the market, there are obstacles and distractions. But God's mission is that of reconciliation and rebirth, and God is present through it all—in the labors of the farmers, at busy marketplaces, in breaking bread around a table, in sitting on the floor to eat rice and fish, in the mourning the dead, and in the joys and pains of daily.

life. Every day there are opportunities for ministry both near and far. if only we have eyes to see.

Through our baptism we are all called to the *Missio Dei* or miss sion of God. It is my great joy to accompany my sisters and broth ers in Indonesia.

Who are you called to accompany?

Megan Ross is a deaconess and ELCA miss sionary serving as an English teacher at the HKBP Deaconess School in North Sumatra.

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HERE'S A HEARTWARMING STORY: An elderly woman wanted to start a new church in her Masai community of Kenya. She teamed up with an evangelist from the Kenya Evangelical Lutheran Church and together they shared the good news with her is neighbors. Twenty-five people were soon ready to be baptized. The local bishop presided at the baptism, and the new congregation celebrated by holding its first party.



A woman who almost single-handedly starts a congregation: Who wouldn't love a story like this? There's only one small problem. When this story landed in my inbox, it only named the bishop who led the baptism. The woman at the heart of the story was not given a name.

I've been gathering and writing stories for the church for 20 years. I love the process of interviewing and shaping our tales. But sometimes I wonder: Could our stories be better?

Humans tell each other stories every day of our ves. "What did you do in school today?" is an early ory prompt; "Tell me about your mission trip" is nother. What we tell and how we tell it shapes our ew of the world. Stories can teach us to trust others

> or fear them. They can teach us to respect or demean, to reach out or shrink back.

> For people asked to share the Good News, storytelling is especially important. Most of our stories of faith are stories about doing. We talk about hunger ministries and international companion relationships and quilting groups and Habitat for

The New Story

Humanity projects and after-school tutoring and a host of other activities that add up to our ministry. Because what we do involves other people, we end up talking about them, too, in newsletter articles, workshops, slide shows, and around the dinner table.

How we talk about our doing and the people we are doing with are

important to me.

As a writer, I've been excited to watch our pproach to ministry start to transform. Globally and ocally, we're moving away from a short-term doing ocus toward long-term relationships.

We're learning that "hit and run" ministry to trangers is less effective than thoughtful ministries that row from strong relationships. We are outgrowing ne one-sided, "we're giving to you" model that forces people to be either givers or receivers. We're recognizing that the people we do things with are companions, not objects. And that ministry is mutual! All around the church, I see people recognizing that everyone has gifts and inviting one another to pool them in God's service.

And then we take the microphone at a mission festival, and we tell the same old story.

It's often a sort of fish story ("35 pounds – it's a record!") that stresses our own gifts and accomplishments while excluding those of the people we serve among. Or it's a story that conveys our love of hierarchy by quoting only the titled and credentialed. What does it say about us when we are more comfortable naming the bishop than learning the name of the woman on the ground? Or when our press releases lift up major donors instead of the widow and her mite?

Changing the way we tell stories is hard work. It's certainly hard for me. In order to tell the new story, I have to look for different things. I have to notice different details and ask different questions.

I also have to be aware of the old patterns of seeing and telling that keep us stuck in an old story to make sure I don't unconsciously fall into them. Here's my checklist.

Consider the protagonist

Protagonista, the Spanish word for protagonist, first came into my life on a Women of the ELCA delegation visit to Peru. There, women's ministries seek to encourage women to be protagonistas-subjects, decision-makers, the main characters of their own lives-because gender oppression in Latin America has kept so many women as the object of someone else's life.

Who is the protagonist of our stories?

Ourselves, of course! The main character, the actor, is someone from our congregation or the project itself. We focus on what we did, what we gave, what we decided, what we created, what we experienced, and what we accomplished. The stories we share begin and end with our own point of view. I call this the "church as hero" story. I've written dozens of them, because we love hearing about successful ministries that serve God's people and turn faltering congregations around. I usually start with a phone interview with a pastor who was proud to talk about his or her church's accomplishments. Now and then, if the deadline permits, I talk to a lay leader as well.

In the final story, front and center is the church and its project. Anyone else who makes it into the story is fuzzy, indistinct.

The problem is that casting ourselves as protagonists again and again reduces our stories to a litany of statistics and been-there-done-thats. Our companions in ministry are no more than the silent backdrop on which we project our own good deeds. What does that say about us?

Reading them now, I'm a little ashamed. Shall we get over insisting that we're the protagonist of every church story, and start giving the plum roles to other people?

Taking the other seriously

Who's out there? What are their names?

What are they good at? What do they know? What gifts do they bring to ministry?

To get beyond our church-as-hero bias, we need to be able to talk about people we do ministry with as more than objects, as the people the church is *doing for*. Ministry is mutual. We are always pooling our gifts to create God's culture together. Our challenge is to learn to tell stories about *doing and being with*.

When we don't know people, we describe them with broad strokes. I see this all the time in stories about mission trips. Lots of details about what we did and experienced are followed by generalizations like "We received so much more than we gave" or "The Africans have much to teach us about practicing our faith." Who were those people, really?

When we tell stories from a relationship, we have

details to draw on. The nameless Masai woman, if we knew her, could teach us something about sharing the good news in inviting ways. The people who stream through our soup kitchens could tell us who they are, why they came, and how they'd like to serve, too—if we freed them from their role as grateful but anonymous consumers of food.

Generalizations are certainly safer and easier than walking among strangers listening to their stories. But if we stay behind the kitchen counter, content to dishlout chili mac with nothing more than a smile, we doom ourselves to writing the same predictable story again and again. Shall we step out from behind the counter, pour two cups of coffee, and start listening?

Respect, respect, respect

I once heard someone stand on a stage and begin a presentation on a congregation's global ministry by saying, "Have you ever been to a third-world country?" It's awful."

I left the room. I hated the way this story depicted Lutheran global engagement. I hated the way it divided people into haves and have-nots. I hated that the narrastor only focused on what the companion country and church lacked.

In this story, all the gifts belonged to the North-American congregation and travelers. All the shortcome ings and problems belonged to the companions—if you could even use that term for the people the narrator was maligning. I don't know where this story went but it probably didn't even offer a generalization like "Africans have much to teach us." In this person's story the Africans had nothing to teach.

Respect and dignity are basic ingredients of Christian relationships. What does it say about our mission relationships if our stories are disrespectful?

Let's create relationships that build up and use words that don't demean. Let's learn one another' names and name one another's gifts. Let's be especially

reful when we are trying to raise money. As a Taninian man asked me recently, "What makes people aink we don't know anything about malaria?" The spertise of the body of Christ comes in all shapes and zes. Shall we practice looking for it and lifting it up in ur stories?

ailure is part of the story

Nhat do we do when part of our story hurts? Do we loss it over, leave it out?

I certainly have. Several times I've been asked to rite about ministries that sounded exciting but were hearly struggling. Because my assignment was to write in upbeat, kumbaya kind of story, I played up the aspiring angles and downplayed the difficult aspects. I bld a beautiful story about ministries that were about 5 close shop. For all intents and purposes, my tales rere obituaries.

Now I understand that my challenge, as a story eller, is to go deeper and tell more. To look for the cress lines and ask about what's not going right. To e candid about how my own ways of living in the orld exacerbate the situation this ministry is trying address. I'm going to step out of my role as church heerleader and feel around for truth.

No more photos cropped to suggest a crowded bom when in fact only 10 people are present. No more cories that focus on the pain or needs of others without onfessing our own.

We are the church, not a public relations agency. overs of Christ, not spin doctors. When we fail, when re sin, shall we talk about it?

hould we even be talking at all?

Until tigers learn to speak, history will be told by unters."

With our laptops, camera phones, YouTube, and acebook accounts, we are the hunters in this proverb. The questions we ask, the notes we take, the photos we shoot on our journeys all embody the hunter's point of view.

More than that, we're so used to telling stories our way that when the tigers do get to speak, we think they are complaining. What's wrong with them? Why aren't they grateful?

Sometimes the most powerful way to tell a story is to let someone else tell it. Shall we give up the microphone, get out of the way, and listen to what the tiger has to tell us?

Which story shall we be part of?

The story I want to live in and tell recognizes that all God's people are gifted. Instead of assigning the point of view and all the gifts to us, the traditional narrators, I want to show how we use our gifts to serve one another.

The story we hear again and again is: They needed a well, so we raised a bunch of money, traveled a long way, and built it for them.

The story I want to write, grounded in respectful relationships that recognize everyone's gifts are recognized and let tigers speak, is: Working side by side with our companions on the well, I began to understand that water is a precious resource, not a commodity that I can waste all day long just because I have indoor plumbing.

Instead of: We support a medical missionary in Tanzania, I want to probe for details that change the story to Did you know that Dr. John Doe is the only non-Tanzanian on a medical staff of 30? His Tanzanian staff trains dozens of community health educators every year.

Instead of naming the bishop, I want to name our anonymous Masai evangelist. And instead of always writing the story, I want to hand my pen to someone else and practice listening.

Changing our stories can change us. Shall we get to work?

Writer and editor Anne Basye tries hard to live simply, write truthfully, and remember that everybody, including her family, is God's beloved child.



EARTH WISE

Rooms of Contemplation

by Catherine Pate

We were outside in the

garden, waiting for the salmon to finish grilling when my friend looked around our yard and said, "It has so many rooms." I, in turn looked around and, for the first time, realized that our yard did have many rooms—five, in fact.

When we bought the house in 1998, the yard was little more than a mud hill sliding gently, but deliberately out to the back lane, with our house neatly perched at the top of the hill. To stop the steady flow of topsoil out our gate, we had to do something drastic.

So we hired a bobcat excavator and had the operator scrape out several tons of Manitoba gumbo (the thick clay earth we're known for in this part of the prairies). Under the tutelage of a general contractor friend of ours, we naively set to work building retaining walls and a two-tiered 1,400-square-foot patio. Did I mention we built the patio by hand using four yards of sand, 14 yards of crushed gravel, and 4,000 reclaimed (not uniform) bricks? Needless to say our weekend project turned into our summer project.

We designed the patio based on one at a local restaurant that has dining spaces separated by wrought iron fencing and pergolas trailing with grape vines.

With 1,400 square feet, we not only had room for our barbeque and dining table on the top level, we were able to create a sitting area where we hang a hammock from the pergola beams, and still have room for a fire pit encircled with Adirondack chairs. The effect is an

outdoor dining room, reading room, and living room.

The second area of our garden is on the third of the three levels. It is the top level, where the house sits. On this level we have a large perennial gardent anchored by an old growth Elm tree that creates a massive canopy over the larger winding sidewalk and koi pond. Visitors are invited to sit, surrounded by wild grasses, and watch the fish and look out over the lower patio beyond.

The last outdoor living space in our garden is where we spend much of the mosquito season (also known as midesummer). It is a screened porch that looks down over the entire yard. This is where we take most of our meals or curl up with books late into the evening when we are forced back inside by bugs.

As a reader, you may be wondering why I have spent your valuable time taking you on a tour of my back yard. What I am inviting you into is a mini experience of the possibilities for contemplation that our garden creates and inviting you to consider where you might be able to carve out (or dig out) the same sort of space.

You see, more than a couple of our friends have said over the years, "I'c' love to just sit in your garden." We are fortunate to be able to do just that, and the results have been remarkable. Unwititingly, we have created sacred space in our immediate surroundings to nunture a contemplative practice we didn't even know we were missing. What if a contemplative practice? It's a practice

esigned to quiet the mind in order cultivate a personal capacity for pncentration, insight, and discernnent. It offers the opportunity for rayer and reflection.

Sitting in our outdoor spaces, the not only set ourselves apart from the hustle and bustle of the forld outside our fence, but with a two short steps out our back door the are also able to take time away from the day-to-day busyness of the inside our home. As we sit by the pond, we see no dishes stacked to be waiting to be washed, no kids the inglified our home. It is a point of the pond, we see no dishes stacked to be waiting to be washed, no kids the inglified our television channels, to laundry waiting to be folded or arpets to be vacuumed.

In our garden, there is simply deep, peaceful awareness of the interconnectedness of all life and noom to just breathe.

Before dinner, my husband and will often meet on the bench by the pond for a drink. There we'll talk over the day's events and what's on the plate for the next day. To me mornings I sit in the garden or a few minutes watching the lowers and listening to the birds efore heading out for the day. I have sometimes invited apartment-welling friends to let themselves not our yard, to just sit in one of the spaces.

We live in an urban neighborhood in the heart of our city. We re within walking distance to one of the major hospitals and down-

town. But in our garden, we occupy a space where the heaviest traffic congestion is created by the birds fighting for the best rock on which to perch while bathing in the pond and the red squirrels chasing the grey squirrels from tree to tree over our heads.

In her book Simple Abundance: A Daybook of Comfort and Joy, Sara Ban Breathnach observes,

"Usually, when the distractions of daily life deplete our energy, the first thing we eliminate is the thing we need the most: quiet, reflective time. Time to dream, time to contemplate what's working and what's not, so that we can make changes for the better."

Life is simpler in our garden, and each room in it offers its inhabitants another opportunity to engage in life-giving activities of hospitality, relationship-building, prayer, reflection, and stillness, each of which contributes to our ability to make our part of the world a little better. In creating our outdoor rooms, we have discovered we have not only transformed our yard, but we have transformed ourselves as well.

Catherine Pate is a writer, editor, market ing consultant, mother, partner, daughter, friend, and amateur gardener living and working on a little patch of heaven in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada.

To create your own sacred space, visit womenoftheelca.org resource pages and download: "Sacred Spaces" and "Sacred Spaces as Metaphor."
Both help you create a holy place in which to worship God.





by Meghan Johnston Aelabouni

AND ME

it was one of those mornings. My husband, who also my co-pastor, was off early to the men's breakfast, leaving ne with the task of getting both kids (and myself) fed, cleaned up, roperly dressed, and out the door in an hour. Eyes on the clock, I oisted my 9-month-old daughter, Natalie, in my arms and herded ry energetic 4-year-old son, Ethan, up the stairs toward the bathbom, eyeing the layer of pureed peaches and crumbled Cheerios overing our dining room floor. Maybe I'll vacuum before we leave, I lought, fully aware that I was kidding myself.

An hour or so later, after one filthy diaper, one unplanned bath, nd one full-fledged tantrum arising from the fact that I hadn't launered my son's favorite shirt, we were only 10 minutes late. Not ad, I thought. Buckling the baby into her carrier, I suddenly heard plashing sounds coming from the bathroom. Inside, the sink was all to overflowing, and my beloved son was piloting a toy boat on ne stormy seas, soaked up to his elbows, radiating joy.

"Ethan! We are LATE!" I bellowed, as I pulled him into his om to change.

"But, Mama..." he began. In no mood to listen, I yanked off the wet shirt and started looking for a clean one. "Mama, mama, MAMA," he repeated insistently. "I want to TELL you something!"

"I don't have time right now," I said through my teeth. "You soaked your clean clothes, and we're late for preschool."

"But, Mama," he said, eyes big and lip quivering. "I was just being Jonah." I sighed, torn between frustration and laughter. Well, at least he's paying attention in Sunday school! "Mama?" Ethan ventured in a small voice, spotting the cracks in the stern expression I adopt for purposes of discipline. "I love you." Thus Jonah survived the wrath of Mom to sail another day.

Upper and lower case

Last week, I was reading a blog called "Momastery," authored by Glennon Melton, a mother of three who writes with penetrating honesty and wit about

the "brutiful" (brutal and beautiful) nature of parenting and daily life. Melton described the difference between "lower-case l life," the life that is unique to each person, and "upper-case L life," life itself. She wrote: "Sometimes I wonder if we live our lower-case I lives just to practice what we believe about upper-case L life."

Christian tradition has a theological word for the same concept: vocation. From the Latin vocare, "to call," our vocation is our calling from God. Through our baptisms, God gives us a purpose, calling us into daily work. Our vocations differ: pastors, potato farmers, potters, pianists, parents. The ways in which we serve God and express our faith often seem small and ordinary. But each vocation is an expression of Vocation. Every act done in love of God and neighbor is holy.

As in Paul's metaphor about the body and its many members, the people of God value every vocation equally—in theory. In practice, this isn't always the case. We sometimes stratify vocations, honoring some more than others: elevating ordained ministry above the ministry of laypeople; elevating vocations with large paychecks above those paying minimum wage (or nothing); elevating letters like M.D. or Ph.D. above letters like SAHP (stay at home parent). All lower-case lives are expressions of upper-case Life; but we act as though some lives are more upper-case than others.

I suspect that many of us, in the "mission field" of our lives, may ask ourselves: Is what I do important? Does my life matter, in the scheme of Life? These questions can be powerful and faithful, if we ask them in the context of discerning the vocations to which God has called us. The problem comes when we attempt to define and evaluate our lives and vocations by contrasting them with others' lives and vocations. Compared to Paul, or Barnabas, or {insert name here}, how could God possibly be working through me?

Confessions of a grumpy pastor-parent-person of faith

In my vocation as a minister of word and sacrament, I'm fortunate. Much of my daily living is recognized as a holy calling. When I preach, lead Bible study, or bring communion into a hospital room, my work is easily identifiable as God's work. And yet, I still succumb to the temptation to compare my ministry with that of others who seem more vital to the church: those who are starting new congregations, serving in other countries, or living on the "cutting edge" of ministry. All is well when I feel I'm making a difference in someone's

life. But when the sink in the men's restroom is leaking, or the van rental bill for the youth trip comes in attitude the quote, or a miscommunication leaves someone upset, I ask myself: Is this ministry?

In my vocation as a parent, I firmly believe myy mom-hood is a holy calling. My husband and I try hards not to allow our calling as pastors to trump our calling as parents, and the congregation we serve is wondered fully supportive of our family. But there are days when both kids are shrieking and I'm shouting to be heard, or when I tell my son the babysitter will put him to bed because Mama and Baba have a meeting at church, and he cries and asks, "Why?"

One of the more aggravating side effects of being a two-pastor household is that our son sometimes associates church with the loss of his parents, however temporarily. *Is this ministry?*

As a person of Christian faith—baptized as an infant, raised in the church, off to seminary directly from college—I sometimes envy those whose stories of coming to know God are as dramatic as Paul's "road to Damascus", experience. I admire the mystics and contemplatives, even as I know that if I tried a silent retreat, my head might explode. (I'm an off-the-charts extrovert.) On particularly cranky days, the image of a faithful Christian who exudes joy and kindness in all circumstances makes me grumble like a Pharisee. *Is this ministry?*

"I reject the devil and all his empty promises"

This questioning and grumbling can overtake met against my will and better judgment. I know it is unhelpful, even sinful, to deny the value of my vocat tion and to envy others' callings. I have been blessed to have people in my life who continually remind me that God has made me in God's image and given me gifts and a purpose.

I frequently preach this message in my congregation, with conviction: that no one is extra; no one is expendable; everyone matters to God and God'

nurch. Still, the voice inside my head whispers: "Your e is so ordinary, and you're not even doing a good b of living it! Best give it up."

I've come to identify this voice as the deceiver: the oponent of God, the speaker of empty promises who kes a vested interest in preventing all of us from fulcling God's vision for our lives. I also suspect I'm not le only victim of the deceiver's mind games. In the orld and in our heads, there is a voice determined to onvince us that our lives don't ultimately matter that such. What better way to stop us from living out our ocations than to tell us there's no point?

When I imagine the early Christians at Antioch ping about the routines of their daily lives and then relcoming Paul and Barnabas into their homes to hear ales of their adventures in mission, I wonder if some ere jealous. I'm certain that I'm projecting my own orldview, but I can't help thinking that at least a few If those Antioch Christians may have felt their daily wes were dull and meaningless by comparison to Paul nd Barnabas. Dangerous and uncomfortable as the postles' work often was, at least it was interesting, and bviously important!

Looking back, it's clear that God worked through he tenacity and commitment of these early communies of believers to ensure the survival and growth of ne church over the centuries. At the time, however, nese ordinary Christians couldn't have known how reir lives would plant the seeds of the "one holy cathoc and apostolic church." Neither can we, people of ith living today, fully know the part we have to play. larely can we see how God is weaving our lives into ne tapestry of Life; and it can seem foolish to believe ve are indispensable to the body of Christ.

istin Bieber to the rescue

In the morning of Jonah and the bathroom sink, I rove to my son's preschool with the radio on and ound myself listening to a Justin Bieber song, "As

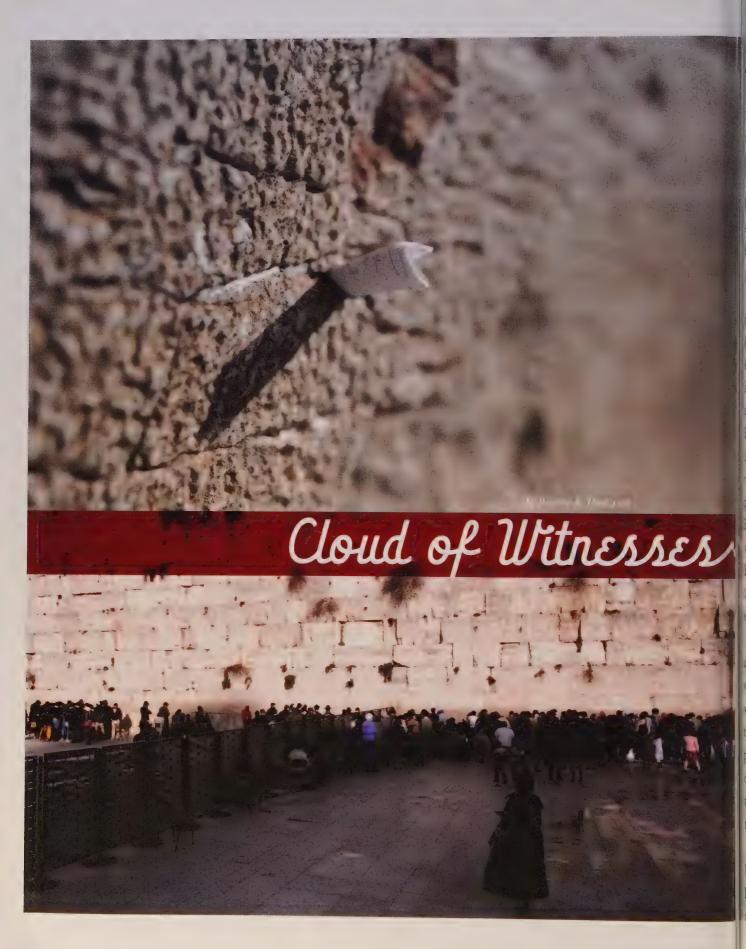
Long as You Love Me." And lo, the song spake unto the people and said: "The grass ain't always greener on the other side; it's green where you water it."

Clichéd as it may be, this sentiment shed some light on my vocational struggles. I was reminded that the process of finding joy and confidence in my calling from God begins when I accept as a starting point the notion that God has called me to be exactly who I am, where I am. I was reminded that God enters into our ordinary, everyday lives in all their imperfection to offer us opportunities to make a difference. I was reminded of a truth deeper than the crumbs embedded in my carpet, deeper than our insecurities: There is no such thing as an ordinary life.

If by the grace of God we can believe this, or at least live each day as an attempt to believe this, God can and will accomplish great and wonderful things through us. For me, this sometimes looks like plunging toilets with good grace and dignity. Yes, this is ministry! It sometimes looks like rocking my sick baby to sleep and realizing that I am holding, not just a life, but Life. Yes, this is ministry! It sometimes looks like celebrating how our congregation is helping to form the faith of my children while I'm doing something else. Yes, this is ministry! It is the moments in which I stop wanting someone else's life, flooded with gratitude for the one I have.

What does it look like for you? What is your ministry? How is God working through even the most mundane and exasperating days of your life in order to show you, and those around you, what is most true about Life? Each of our stories will be different; but as we seek to discover and celebrate our own vocations, may we trust in the God of Jesus Christ, who invites us to dive into the waters of our baptismal calling-soaked to the elbows with purpose and joy. w

Meghan Johnston Aelabouni serves as co-pastor with her husband, Gabi Aelabouni, at Trinity Lutheran Church in Fort Collins, Colo. Meghan has blogged for the Huffington Post and written for The Lutheran magazine.



to admit that in life before cancer, I had a dim view of the Internet's bility to bring people together. Living and working rith others constantly connected to digital tools left he skeptical that any new relational depth was being lumbed through our wired lives.

Then I got sick. Really sick. In a matter of months, went from being a healthy 41-year-old religion profesor, wife, and mother of two to a virtual invalid with a roken back, a stage IV cancer diagnosis, and a grim prognosis for the future.

To keep family and friends updated during the early ays following the diagnosis, my brother created a Carng Bridge site for me, a website dedicated to connectig people with serious illnesses with those who care bout them. News of my diagnosis spread quickly; just s quickly loved ones signed up to receive my Caring ridge postings. From my narration of what stage IV ancer had done to my body to the grief of having to esign from my very full and wonderful life, each of my osts was met with dozens of postings to the Caring bridge site, as well as additional emails, cards, packages, isits and calls from people from all corners of my life. started to realize that through our connectedness via Caring Bridge, I was being surrounded by a cloud of vitnesses greater than any I could have imagined before.

Thus it is through this cancer journey that I've been wakened to a new-indeed, almost mystical-undertanding of the church universal, mediated through vhat I've come to call the virtual body of Christ; that is, he body of Christ incarnated in, with, and through the ower of sites like Caring Bridge. And my experiences f God's grace mediated through a website have led me o want to tell a new story about an ancient concept: he church universal.

HE CHURCH UNIVERSAL

n life before cancer, I didn't give the church universal ll that much thought. I could-and would-extol the virtues of local gatherings of the church. It's been said that when the church is really being the church, it is especially present with those who suffer. As the daughter of a pastor, I have witnessed local churches time and again embody the hands and feet of Christ in their ministries to those in pain.

But since my cancer diagnosis, I have been surprised and humbled by the way in which the church universal has become a tangible agent of grace in my life, a gift that accompanied me through the valley of the shadow of cancer.

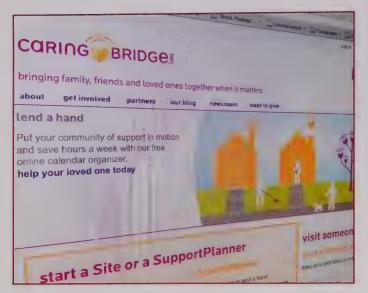
Now let me be clear: I'm not trying to sound New Agey or to issue some feel-good platitude about how cancer has made me more appreciative of the value of community.

What I'm talking about is a new understanding of the church universal, a breathtakingly broad embodiment of Christ's hands and feet ministering to me and my family during our walk through the valley of the shadow of cancer.

This is not to say that before the Internet people were without the benefit of vast networks of prayers and support. But Internet connection has exponentially increased the speed and scope of such connections. And this more frequent communication-in my case, both with my updates and with the guestbook entries of encouragement—has been of immeasurable support to us since the diagnosis.

Not only were members of our own church kept up-to-date through Caring Bridge, but the website made my story available to many other communities of faith, from the church where I grew up to the church my husband and I joined during graduate school in Nashville to my in-laws' church in Duluth and to a friend's church outside Chicago.

Because of the Caring Bridge journal and guestbook entries, toddlers in Portland knew my story and said my name in their nightly prayers; students and staff at a girls' school in Baltimore learned about me



and included my name in Friday worship; even relatives in Sweden and Norway received regular updates via Caring Bridge and held us regularly in prayer. These Internet connections allowed others to gather around us *virtually*, and through their frequent posts reporting about these gathering on our behalf, we were literally carried along by the body of Christ when we did not have the strength to carry on ourselves.

This experience of the virtual body of Christ has also gifted me with a fresh appreciation of the ecumenical character of church catholicity. Prompted by my entries on the Caring Bridge site, many of my friends from the Roman Catholic tradition—the church that holds most tightly to this notion of universality—have embodied Christ to me in stunning ways. I've had Mass dedicated to me across the globe; I've been given a medallion blessed and sent on to me by a priest friend.

My Catholic family and friends have gathered as church and held me and my family with them when they've done so. These traditions of dedicating, blessing, and honoring—traditions that make rare appearances in our Protestant expressions of church—have made their mark on my soul.

But there's still more to say about the universal nature of the church. I've also become convinced that the church universal extends even further, beyond the bounds of Christian gatherings to include those of other faiths and even those of no particular faith.

SOURCE OF INSPIRATION

Take the grace bestowed upon me by one of my agnostic Jewish colleagues. Shortly after she returned from a study abroad trip to Israel with a group of our students, she sent me an email message. The message began with a disclaimer about how she has never been a very religious person. From her childhood in Israel to her adult life here in the United States, she has attended synagogue but often felt on the outside of explicitly religious practices like prayer.

I was intrigued by the story of my colleague's uneasy relationship with religion but unsure as to why she was taking the time to share the story with mer Even though she and I had worked together for over a dozen years, we had had few in-depth conversations and none of them had been about religion.

I read on.

My colleague wrote about my postings on Caring Bridge and about how my journey with cancer—and along with it, my struggles with my own faith—had become a source of inspiration to her. Spurred on by my story, she had even gone out on a limb and attempted to pray herself.

I was startled to learn that the public narration of my journey with cancer on Caring Bridge—a task? found difficult, especially when it came to talking about faith—had become an impetus for the deepening of this colleague's own spiritual journey.

But that wasn't all there was to the message.

All of the information about my colleague's struggles with religion and the inspiration she drew from reading my journals was mere backdrop for what she was about to tell me about her trip to Israel.

She went on to describe the group's day at the Western Wall, often called the Wailing Wall, in Jerusalem. She told me that she and another colleague has

aced prayers for me into the cracks in the wall. She rote about how moved she was to see several of our adents add their prayers for me to the wall as well.

To learn that prayers for me had even made it to e Wailing Wall was profoundly moving. We Chrisans trace our spiritual inheritance back to the Jews ho built that very wall.

Knowing Jesus prayed and studied inside that wall id that prayers for me remain in the city of Jerusa--m-a holy city to both Jews and Christians (and Musns, too)-further supported my widening view of the turch universal. But my colleague had not yet come her main point.

She wrote about how in their travels throughout rael the group had visited many churches in addition synagogues and mosques. And much to my surprise nd even to her own, the churches they visited became aces where she tried out her newly acquired practice prayer.

In each church her group visited, my colleague told e, she would sit down, bow her head, and ask Jesus r a favor: that he might consider healing her friend ith cancer.

Her message to me ended with this: I hope I didn't Fend Jesus—after all, I'm a Jew and I don't even pray regurly—and there I was, asking Jesus for a favor. I think he'll ok with that, won't he?

NIVERSAL COMMUNITY OF SAINTS

tunned, I reread the message, making sure I hadn't advertently rearranged the words.

But I hadn't. My agnostic Jewish colleague had ndeed written to tell me that she had prayed to Jesus and asked him for a favor. For me.

Words still elude me when I try to describe what is act of prayer has meant to me. And I'm convinced has to fit somewhere inside a theology of the church niversal. I realize it's tricky and complicated, but for nis particular Christian there's no other way to say it: knowing that Jesus was asked a favor for me by a Jewish colleague bore saving love, saving presence, and saving hope to me in a time of deep brokenness, struggle, and despair. I think this beautiful act has to be bound up somehow, someway, to God's universal community of saints; it's too much like Christ for it to be any other way.

When it comes to the church universal, then, my understanding has been broken open to a new beyond-beyond what we Christians are able to imagine, beyond tidy categories of what counts as religious and what doesn't.

While such embodiments of grace flowing from the virtual body of Christ continue to take my breath away, it's also important to say that Caring Bridge has not been a wholly unproblematic tool for me to use. For instance, friends and acquaintances have told me how much they love my Caring Bridge site-while I wish to God I didn't need one. When I could find no words to express my despair over my new life, I heard from some well-meaning folks that I needed to post because they needed to hear how I was doing.

There are moments when the Caring Bridge website becomes like any other social networking site for some readers. But for me, my vehicle for updating others on life with stage IV cancer will never be just about social networking.

Even with its potential pitfalls, my life-as it is held up by the ongoing love, prayers, and support of so many-is living testimony that God's saving grace continues to work through our humble human creations. Thanks be to God for the Internet.

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STORYTELLING

by Audrey West

BIBLE STUDY

Theme verse

"When they arrived, they called [NIV translates this "gathered"] the church together and related all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles. And they stayed there with the disciples for some time." (Acts 14:27–28)

Hymn

"I Love to Tell the Story" (Evangelical Lutheran Worship 661)

Overview

This month we revisit the book of Acts where Paul and Barnabas have returned to Antioch after traveling many miles to share the good news of Jesus Christ. There, among the Christians who had commissioned them for the journey, they share the story of all that God has done. As we gather to learn from them, what stories of faith will we tell?

Storytelling

If you have ever traveled to a foreign country (or even a distant state) and spent a good deal of time there, perhaps you know how it feels to come home again. Familiar surroundings, people who talk like you, food that seems normal, your own bed: These things can be comforting after an extended time away in a place that follows a different lifestyle or unfamiliar customs. Those differences can make a homecoming that much sweeter, but they also make the travel stories all the more compelling. Whether one is on the telling end or the hearing end, stories are a great way to share experiences with others, introducing them to people and events they may not have experienced for themselves.

Some stories have a way of drawing people together, especially if there is already a connection, such as a common family history or shared commitments. Whenever Apostle Paul reminds his Jewish and Gentild listeners about the old, old story of the Exodus, for example (Acts 13:17) he invites them to share his claim about the kind of God this is. As readers, we join the generations who hear in the story both example and confession of what it means to trus: God. We also remember how difficult it may be to trust in the midst of crisis and how God remains faithful despite our unfaithfulness.

This month's study passage is about the story of what God has done in and through Paul and Barnabas. As they travel through cities of the Roman Empire, these two missionaries become part of the older old story of God's covenant with the Jews, even as they proclaim that God is doing a new thing in Christ by welcoming the Gentiles into the covenant as well.

The stories of Paul and Barna, bus become part of the larger story of the Christians at Antioch and thanks to the author of Acts, pand of our story as well. They remind us that God works through us to

envey the good news of Jesus Christ to the world. (See 'elling the New Story," p. 16.)

Name a favorite biblical story that for you is a meaningful part of the "old, old story" that helps you to know something of God and God's relationship to the world. Tell how that story is meaningful to you.

etting up the story

this month's study passage, Barnabas and Paul are st now completing their first missionary journey to are the good news of Jesus. We meet Paul (named ul at that point) in Acts 8:1, where we learn that he proved of the stoning of Stephen and persecuted embers of the fledgling Jesus movement. After a markable encounter with the risen Christ on the road Damascus, during which his name is changed to aul, he begins to preach and teach about Jesus (Acts 11-19). This results in more than one plot against his e, but he is rescued by fellow believers.

Barnabas, who had befriended Paul on his return Jerusalem, later brings Paul to Antioch, where the vo of them "met with the church and taught a great any people" (Acts 11:26). We should note in passing at the phrase "met with the church" is literally "gathed with the church."

Paul and Barnabas again appear together in Acts 13, here we learn that they are "prophets and teachers" nong the church at Antioch, set aside by the Holy Spirfor "the work to which I have called them" (13:1-2). cts chapters 13-14 tell of their travels and of the results their preaching and teaching, during which "a great umber of both Jews and Greeks (Gentiles) became elievers" (Acts 14:1). However, their experiences were ot entirely positive, as other Jews and Greeks were pposed to their message and attempted to kill them rith stones (14:5-7). Our study passage picks up just fter that, with Paul and Barnabas continuing their jourey to share the good news of Jesus.

READ ACTS 14:21-28.

- When you have finished reading the passage, close your Bible and re-tell the episode from the perspective of Paul or Barnabas (that is, as a first-person account). It is not necessary to recall every detail from memory; simply focus on the events that stand out for you or are most noteworthy.
- [Optional] Create a list of questions you would like to ask about the passage. At the end of the study, return to your questions and see which of them were answered, and which were not. Any questions that remain unanswered may serve as topics for your own further study sometime in the future.

Talking to strangers

Paul and Barnabas are on the second half of a whirlwind tour, road-tripping their way around the eastern part of the Mediterranean to cities in what are now Syria, Cyprus, and Turkey. As Acts tells it, they do not stay very long in any one place. Indeed, reading through our study passage, one gets the feeling that they were constantly on the move-Lystra, Iconium, Antioch, the regions of Pisidia and Pamphylia, then Perga and Attalia-in terms of distance this is about a third of their journey, so we can imagine how much they are getting around. Anyone who has ever traveled over an extensive distance to many locales knows just how energizing and exhausting such a journey would be.

Thanks to the magnificent system of roads established during the rule of the Roman Empire, travel among all these cities was considerably easier than it would have been elsewhere or at another time. Except at the beginning and end of the trip, which required travel by ship (departing from and returning to Antioch in Syria), Paul and Barnabas would have traveled most of the way by foot. It is likely, too, that they had to depend on local hospitality whenever they arrived in a new city as Acts does not indicate that they already knew people there. Most of the time they would have been sharing the story of what God had done in Jesus

with people they had never seen before. Their standard procedure upon arrival in a city was to go to the Jewish synagogue and share their message with the Jews ("they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews," Acts 13:5). This makes sense, since they are themselves Jews, albeit Jews who believe that Jesus is God's Messiah. Remember that Messiah (Hebrew) and Christ (Greek) mean the same thing, which is anointed one. Also present at the synagogues are "Godfearers," that is, Gentiles who worship the God of Israel and take on some of the practices of Judaism, but who are not converts. These are among the first Gentiles to become followers of Christ, proof that God has "opened the door of faith" for them (Acts 14:27). (See "With Fresh Eyes," p. 12.)

- 4. Paul and Barnabas preached, but that is not the only method for telling others about Jesus. What are some of the ways you share your own faith?
- 5. Which do you think is easier: sharing Jesus with people you know or with people you do not know? Why?

Commendation at Antioch

When Barnabas and Paul were set apart by the Holy Spirit for this journey, the church at Antioch had "laid their hands on them and sent them off" (Acts 13:3). Our study passage recalls that commissioning when the two men return to Antioch at the end of their trip, by reminding readers that the church had "commended [them] to the grace of God for the work" (Acts 14:26).

The Greek word for *commend* is *paradidomi* (parah-DID-oh-me), which means to hand over. The same word means *to arrest*, and it is sometimes used with that sense in Acts, but here it carries the connotation of entrusting the two men to God, as it does later when Paul and Silas depart for Paul's second missionary journey: "Paul chose Silas and set out, the believers commending him to the grace of the Lord" (Acts 15:40).

Paul's missionary journeys

It is traditional to speak of three missionary journeys undertaken by Paul: (1) Acts 13–14; (2) Acts 15:39–18:22; and (3) Acts 18:23–21:16. Assigning precise dates to the journeys is difficult—in part because Paul's own account differs from Acts in some important ways—and there is only one date that can be confirmed. Acts 18:12–17 indicates that Paul is brought to trial before the Proconsul Gallio, whom we know from other sources was in Achaia only in 51–52 A.D. All other dates of Paul's life, before and after, are calculated from that starting point. The first journey probably took place between 45–49 A.D.

This language of commendation, or "handing over" to the grace of God, suggests a few things:

The mission of the church parallels the mission of Jesus' first disciples. Just as Jesus sent out his discipled two-by-two to the Jewish towns and villages of Galiles (Mark 6:7; Matthew 10:5–6, Luke 9:1–2) so the Hole Spirit sends Barnabas and Paul to share the good news around the Greco-Roman cities of the Mediterranean:

Carrying the good news beyond the borders is ministry shared by the whole church and not only be those who are sent. Paul and Barnabas were significant teachers and leaders in Antioch, which suggests that their departure would have been a loss for that community. Others would have had to step into the void left be their departure and, although we do not hear the stories of those others, we can be certain that their contributions were important for the mission of the church.

Not everyone's calling involves significant trave-Most people serve God closer to home. Barnabas and Paul were an extension of their community, represening the church in its witness to the wider world, while presumably most of the Antioch Christians stayed behind at Antioch.

The results of the gospel are in the hands of God, et of humans. Paul and Barnabas are set apart by Holy Spirit and commended by the community the grace of God; that is, God is in charge here! By accounts their missionary work was successful in int it resulted in the expansion of the gospel to many entiles. At the same time, however, they occasionally beived a hostile reception or were attacked and had get out of town in a hurry: hardly a mark of success.

Paul and Barnabas were set apart by the Holy Spirit to go on this missionary journey. Imagine that your "Monday through Saturday life" is the place where you have been sent by the Holy Spirit. How would you describe your "mission field" and what are some ways that you could be a witness there to God's good news in Jesus Christ?

that God has done

When they arrived, they called the church together nd related all that God had done with them..." (Acts 1:27). The NRSV translates part of this verse, "they lled the church together," but the New International ersion is closer to the Greek: "they gathered the nurch together." The word in question is synago (soon-H-go), which is the word most commonly used for uther in the New Testament and also in the sessions this Bible study. Paul and Barnabas gathered their Immunity and told the story of all that God had done.

Imagine returning from a long trip, eager to share ith family and friends what you have experienced: e people you met, the foods you ate, the transportaon glitches you endured. These stories after the trip in be as lively as the trip itself, and there can be great y and excitement (or relief, if your experiences were specially trying!) in sharing the details with those you we. Even more significant, perhaps, are the stories f how you have been affected by the trip: what you arned, how you see things differently, the impact of vents on your life and the lives of others, even what

you suffered. (See "Cloud of Witnesses," p. 26.)

If we were to read the entire story of that first missionary journey as it is recounted in Acts 13-14, we would learn about a remarkable healing, listen to several synagogue speeches and sermons, and hear of more than one threat against Paul's life, including an incident in which he was beaten nearly to death. Even without those details, however, we may discern a good deal of what Paul and Barnabas have been up to. Their testimony to the church at Antioch is that God has been at work through their very human activities.

- RE-READ Acts 14:21–28. Note the things that Paul and Barnabas did (not the things that others did). List them on a piece of paper. (You may omit the references to travel.)
- 8. Look over the list that you have created, and identify one or more items on the list that has happened to you at some time. In a few sentences, tell someone what happened, beginning your account with the words, "This is something that God has done in my life..."

Opening the door of faith

The most significant aspect of Barnabas and Paul's work, and the central part of the story they shared when they returned to Antioch, was that God had "opened a door of faith for the Gentiles" (Acts 14:27). The events of their missionary journey suggest that this open door had at least two elements:

God opened the hearts of Gentiles to the message of God's salvation in Christ Jesus, and they heard the good news and believed;

God opened the hearts of the Jewish Christians, enabling them to welcome a group of people who were traditionally excluded from their number.

Antioch: Where it begins and ends

Antioch, the capital of Roman Syria, figures prominently in Paul and Barnabas' missionary journey as it is the place that commissions their trip and welcomes them back at the end (Acts 13:2-3; 14:26). Syrian Antioch is not to be confused with Antioch of Pisidia in Asia Minor, also in our study passage (Acts 14:21). Syrian Antioch was located about 300 miles north of Jerusalem. Based on its size and prosperity, it was considered to be the third largest. city of the Roman Empire, exceeded only by Rome and Alexandria (Josephus, Jewish War). Furthermore, there was a very large Jewish population in Antioch, making it a logical place for the early expansion of the message about Jesus, both to Jewish and Gentile inhabitants of the city. It is in Antioch, Luke says in Acts, that the disciples were first called "Christians" (Acts 11:26).

We should not underestimate what a big deal it was for the Jewish followers of Jesus to welcome Gentiles into the church. The conflict over the Gentiles is arguably the most significant issue facing the Jesus movement in the first decades after Jesus' death.

Those who opposed full inclusion of the Gentiles seemed to have Scripture on their side. God's covenant with Abraham included circumcision of all male offspring (Genesis 17:9–10), and that law was reaffirmed through Moses (Leviticus 12:1–3). Indeed, when the Jerusalem council met to discuss the matter, Luke tells us that "... some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, 'It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses'" (Acts 15:5).

The followers of Jesus had to discern what was important to keep in order to remain faithful to the God of their ancestors—and what they could let go (even if it violated what they thought they knew from

their scriptures). They had to discern: Is God calling them to re-tell the old, old story? Or is God involving them in a new story? Or is it a combination of the two retelling the old, old story but with a new chapter? (See "A Moveable Faith," p. 36.)

9. Think back over your life as a Christian. What is something related to the church or your faith that you understand differently now than you did at a time in the past?
What contributed to your change of understanding?

Stories of faith

While reading the Book of Acts it is tempting to thinh that the earliest Christians went through life having one remarkable, miraculous experience after another. We hear of healings, conversions, escapes from prison rescues from shipwreck, and a host of other adventures befitting the lives of ancient heroes. And we hear, as well, of suffering and injustice and persecution. There is little that is ordinary about their lives as they move from one amazing event to another. Think of it: How often do we read in the Bible about managing the laur dry, running a board meeting, taking aging parents the doctor, or finding a babysitter? (See "Jonah, Justin Bieber, and Me," p. 22.)

One may wonder about the Christians at Antioch. Those people who stayed behind while Paul and Barmabas were traveling all over the place: Did they ever ask themselves, "What has God done with me?" We will never know for sure. However, as listeners to the story of God at work in Christ, they (and we) became commected to that story and even a part of that story. Their own lives of faith were caught up in what God was doing every bit as much as were the lives of Paul and Barnabas.

10. Write one sentence that tells the story (or one of the stories) of how God is at work in you or in your community, either in spectacular ways or through ordinary, everyday events or activities. The sentence will be used as part of the closing prayer.

Barnabas

Ne first meet Barnabas in Acts 4:36–37: "There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom he apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means son of encouragement"). He sold a field that melonged to him, then brought the money, and laid at the apostles' feet."

After Paul's call on the road to Damascus, Barnabas was instrumental in facilitating the relationship between Paul and the Jerusalem apostles Acts 9:25). He was an early visitor to the Antioch thurch after news came of the conversion of many Greeks (Gentiles) who were there, after which he bought out Paul and brought him to Antioch as well Acts 11:19–26). He was "a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith" (Acts 11:24). Paul mentions him in several of his letters.

Prior to Paul's second missionary journey, Barnabas and Paul had a disagreement over whether to bring John Mark, and they parted ways (Acts 15:36–40).

Looking ahead

In the final session of this Bible study, we join the disciples after the resurrection of Jesus as they receive the promise that the Holy Spirit will empower them to be Christ's witnesses in their own community and beyond. As much as they might like to stay and bask in Jesus' glory, it is time to go. They have been gathered in order to be sent, so that they might live out their faith in the world beyond their comfort zone.

Closing prayer

Gracious God, we give you thanks for all that you have done among your people and the whole world, especially through your Son, Jesus Christ. Help us to see your hand in our lives and in the lives of our churches and communities. Give us courage to tell the story about the ways you are at work in our gathered communities including the following [participants read their answers from question 10 here]. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

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HAVE YOU SEEN CAFÉ LATELY?

VISIT



TODAYE



A MOVEABLE FAITH

by Brooke Petersen

Surrounded by stacks of boxes and bags I jumped out of bed one early June morning. Today was the day. The big day. The day that had been coming for weeks. Moving day.

Moving day might be exciting words for some families, but for me, it was greeted with a pretty serious dose of stress. After months of discernment, lots of prayer, and more than a little uncertainty, my family and I had decided that it was time to throw caution to the wind and embark on a new chapter in our lives. I was leaving my beloved first-call church on the Northwest side of Chicago, an enormous parsonage with more rooms than I knew what to do with, and a neighborhood we had called home, for a much smaller condo and the beginning of a new adventure as I started a doctoral program. It was a day of new beginnings and the start of a long season of goodbyes.

I have made several moves over the course of my life. The move from my childhood home to a cramped and sterile dorm room started with lots of planning and a number of trips to Target for the essentials I was used to having with my family. The move from college dorm room to a slightly run-down college apartment involved a number of large black trash bags to get my belongings from one place to another in the trunk of my rusty old car.

A semester abroad in Kenya had me taking most of my belongings around the world in a hiker's backpack, only to realize that packing too much was quite a problem when you were forced to carry most of it on your back.

A move from seminary to my first call and that big parsonage found me trying to stretch my meager amount of furniture into a four-bedroom house, a house bigger than anything I had ever imagined for myself.

Like most people, however, I filled that house up quickly. Cabinets that were once so large suddenly seemed small after inheriting a number of pots and pans. Christmas decorations could have their very own corner of the basement. Lots of things could have their own corner of the basement. I stored stuff under beds. Rooms that seemed big were suddenly small, with plenty stored in closets and corners. My stuff that once fit in a large hiking backpack now filled up a four-bedroom home.

GIFT AND CHALLENGE

That June moving day meant taking the stuff of a four-bedroom house and finding a way to shrink it all down to fit into a small two-bedroom Chicago condo. The basement had to be cleaned out, the cabinets emptied, closets sorted through. It was time to downsize, and, as anyone who has ever done it before knows, downsizing is both gift and challenge.

There is something exciting about having less, no matter what the commercials tell you. Prioritizing and minimizing have their own kind of freedom. But, there is great challenge that comes with moving because it means letting go of things that were once comforting. It means deciding if that family dish set you have moved three times is worth hauling to one more home. It means figuring out what is really important because when you are downsizing you just can't take it all.

Moving means change. Some moves are like walking into wide open spaces, full of endless possibilities for how this new house will become a home. Other moves are more difficult, the ones that come because of unplanned circumstances—homes get foreclosed, jobs change, future plans take us to places we hadn't imagined. And with every move comes the inevitable packing, figuring out what is going to come with us this time, what is most important to us, what we can't live without.

MOVEMENT OF FAITH

The life of faith requires its own moves—times where experience and a fresh interpretation of God's word bring change. Sometimes, the vision of God we have been carrying with us must be examined to see if it fits into our new thinking.

Sometimes movements of faith come when we aren't ready. We confront tragedy, or suffering, or death, and what we had always imagined was true doesn't fit into this new world we are experiencing. Sometimes the movements of faith come because

we've grown—we see the world through eyes that an more mature. Sometimes the movement of faith come because we encounter another person on the journey and in that encounter we are changed. The way we have assumed God works no longer fits when we think of our neighbor who may be quite different than ware, but still a child of God.

The circumstances of the newly born church have the disciples doing their own kind of moving in the Actual story that our Bible study focuses on this month. They must make room for new ideas, new developments and new ways of accepting people into the church.

The disciples have witnessed the incredible mysterus of Easter, when a Savior they thought was dead rise again. Jesus promised them that the Spirit was going to be with them, even after he ascends into heaven, and this promise has already come to fruition on the amazing and fiery day of Pentecost.

In Acts we read about how the Holy Spirit had descended upon them. Now these disciples are such denly a part of a growing church that they never could have imagined. Thousands of people convert because of a sermon. Believers are inspired to share all that there have with the community so that no one among them would be in need.

Apostle Paul, a persecutor of this newly born church has a conversion experience on the road to Damascus, and begins to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to all who will listen.

NEW LIFE AS THE CHURCH

Acts is an adventure story—in its pages we find latanights in prison, shipwrecks and storms, sermons and skeptics. But Acts is also a story of great change and how the players had to adjust to new circumstances. This new church is growing, and with this growing comes tough choices about how God is moving among God's people. How is the church to remain faithful to God's purpose? Somehow, the followers of Jesus had to

al a way to tell the story of God, even as the world und them was changing. What were they to keep in ese stories? What needed to be cleaned out? What is hidden in basements and closets that they needed rake into God's new church?

If we take a close look, we might find that the estions these new followers of Jesus struggle with much like ours. We, too, are called to accept "the er." Take for example, Simon Peter and Cornelius. Simon Peter is familiar to us—he is an apostle, a folver of Jesus, one of the 12 disciples that traveled all or the countryside with Jesus. He is a Jew. Cornelius our officer in the Roman army, a devout man, and a ntile.

What separates these two men in our text? They th are devout, they both fear God. They both receive rions-Cornelius is visited by an angel who tells him send for Simon Peter; Simon Peter falls into a trance H sees a vision of a sheet full of animals-clean and cclean animals.

What separates them is their heritage, the difference tween Jews and Gentiles. They do not mix well. They not share meals; they do not stay in one another's mes. This is part of what makes them who they are; s part of their faith story.

For Simon Peter, the rules about what is clean and clean set him apart from the Gentiles. It is part of how shows loves and respect for God by observing God's

Cornelius, though our text tells us that he prays nstantly to God, is understood by Jewish believers of us to be outside God's chosen people.

In the 10th chapter of Acts, these two are called by od to come together. And once together, they share e good news of Jesus Christ. In an amazing gift no one w coming, they experience their own Pentecost, as the oly Spirit descends on all who are gathered, Jew and entile. Old beliefs had to be cleaned out to make more om for what God had in store.

EXPANDING THE HORIZON

Every so often, in our spiritual lives, we encounter times that feel like a moving day of faith. What we thought we knew needs cleaning out or updating. Our limited assumptions about God may need to be expanded so that more of our neighbors can find a home in God's love. These moving days of faith can be unsettling as what we previously believed faces challenges.

In these stories in Acts, God is expanding the believers' understanding. God's followers aren't being asked to abandon a God they knew-they are being asked to see God in a new way. The core foundations that are at the heart of God-grace, mercy, and forgiveness-are the same. The good news of Jesus and what Jesus did for us never changes.

Stories like that of Peter and Cornelius remind us that we are in good company when moving days of faith come.

We always have the option to stay exactly where we are, to refuse to face the possibility of change. God never orders a moving truck for us. But if we are willing to pay attention to the nudging of the Spirit, we might discover that as we grow and change, God has amazing new things in store for us. If we are willing to clean out our basements and our closets and examine the things we have held dear to see if they still fit, we will find that God is often expanding our horizons, offering us more as we travel through this life of faith.

Our faith is an adventure. And like our ancestors in faith in the book of Acts, we can't stay the same. Sometimes we have to pack up old beliefs and let them go. Moving is change, and change is hard, but often, on the other side, there is an opportunity for a new adventure, a new experience of our God. we

Brooke Petersen is an ordained pastor in the ELCA. Her ministry has been in the Chicago area, and now she is pursuing a Ph.D. in pastoral care and counseling at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary also in Chicago. When she isn't reading, Brooke enjoys travelling the world with her husband, cooking, and knitting.



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ACE NOTES

10 Percent

Linda Post Bushkofsky



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Here are the statistics:

In 2013 elections for synod bishops will be held in 25 of our 65 synods.

Currently, seven of our 65 synod bishops are women, or 10 percent.

Of the total number of active ELCA clergy, 3,300 or 31.9 percent are women.

The best estimate is that 61.9 percent of frequent worshippers in ELCA congregations are women.

In our purpose statement we commit ourselves to support one another in our callings. Given the makeup of our congregations and the number of women clergy, more women should be bishops. Ten percent is not enough. Society reflects that. Our newly elected 113th U.S. Congress includes nearly 20 percent women.

It's not just a numbers game. To respond to the needs facing the church in the 21st century, the leadership model of command and control should be replaced with transparency and inclusion, and those are leadership traits that come naturally to women. "Women employ a more participative leadership style, are more likely to share information and power, and have strong relational skills that make them seem empathic to their staffs," writes Carol Kinsey Goman in The Washington Post (July 26, 2011).

In these challenging times, those are qualities that would aid a bishop as she or he carries out the constitutional mandates of the church, including the responsibility to preach, teach, and administer the sacraments; exercise leadership in mission; and oversee and administer the work of the synod, among other things.*

I'm not saying all male bishops exert a command-and-control leadership style. I recognize that generalizing about men and women can involve some stereotyping. But I am suggesting that there's room in the church-and especially within its bishops-for the more collaborative style of leadership. And I am suggesting that participants in Women of the ELCA have a responsibility to lead the church in making that a reality.

An introduction to prayer resources found in a toolkit for synod bishop elections prepared by the ELCA Offices of the Presiding Bishop and Secretary includes this language:

"As an election, it is a process governed by the constitution, bylaws, and continuing resolutions of the synod; however, it is also a call process. It involves discernment, from the potential nominees and from the synod. Thus, engaging in prayerful reflection and seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit are indispensable aspects of the process of nomination and election, regardless of the particular provisions in the synod's governing documents."

Whether or not you are a voting member at your synod's assembly this year, you can be involved in the discernment process. Find out what nomination process is used in your synod so you can understand how to advance names. Pray for and with the pastors of your synod. You have an important role in helping to shape the future of our church.

Linda Post Bushkofsky is executive director of Womef the ELCA.



AMEN!

Blessed Change

by Catherine Malotky

God, here is a sign of

the movement of your Spirit. I sat at table with eight women, all younger than I, each full of stories, fully engaged in her vocation, energy flying, smiles and laughter surrounding the listening. And each is a pastor. I looked around the room, and they were not the only women. There were many more at other tables, scattered among their male colleagues.

I remember, God, when my parents lovingly told 7-year-old me that I could not be a pastor because I was a girl. I remember a time when I had never seen a woman pastor. How long ago was that true, God? Just over 40 years?

I remember being the only female in a seminary class. I remember hearing stories from my classmates' internships—tussles about dangling earrings and wearing pants instead of skirts. I remember when plenty of faithful people read the Bible and said "no" to women's ordination. And I remember the novelty of us, the eagerness of those who had long worked for this forward movement to also be pastored by us and to hear our thanks.

These women, and some men, were commended by their own convictions and the needs of the church for a journey toward inclusion of women in its leadership. It seemed new, then. Some received the message with open arms and joined in. Some resisted and even threatened.

But those early visionaries among my mother's and grandmother's generations swam against the tide until, now, I can sit at a table filled to the brim with women pastors doing powerful work it congregations everywhere. They dare to imagine, to endure criticism, to not blafraid of a more inclusive church. God, lam so grateful.

As Paul and Barnabas returned with stories of their journey, we have storied too of this journey toward inclusion. We can see the faces of those who welcomed the change, who put themselves on the line among friends and relatives, who weathered it all. And now, 40 years lated we see the fruits of all their labor.

Our church is changing again, Good We are asking new questions about inclusivity, learning how to welcome people we do not recognize because of economic class, or sexual orientation, or ethnic heritage, or citizenship status. Some do Bible study in pubs and some worship in homes. Some connect on the Internet and some don't come every Sunday.

So we have to ask, God, what will happen to your church? Will it survive

Yet, we have a story of surviving and even thriving, from our own lives and memories. Such fundamental change women pastors—and because we were brave and trusted you, God, we have discovered new blessings and opportunity. We hear the old stories of faith with new wrinkles, because new eyes are reading them and new ears hearing them. We are blessed, and we will be again. In Jesus' name. Amen.

The Rev. Catherine Malotky, an ELCA pasto, serves at Luther Seminary as a philanthropic adviser. She has served as a parish pastor, edito, teacher, and retreat leader.

SAVING LIVES THROUGH EDUCATION AND GIFTS

he women of Sierra Evangelical Lutheran Church, Sierra Vista, Ariz., sponsored a Malaria Awareness Day last fall. The speaker, Catherine Samuel-Ojo, is a native of Nigeria, Africa, and a registered nurse at the local Veteran's Administration facility. She had malaria and so has firsthand knowledge of the disease. We sang, prayed, and shared an African lunch.

-Submitted by Linda Radwick



Gifts to Women of the ELCA's 25th anniversary appeal support the ELCA Malaria Campaign and Women of the ELCA. Visit www.womenoftheelca.org and click on the "Donate Now" button at the top of the page. Then choose "25th anniversary appeal" to make an online gift. Call 800-638-3522, ext. 2730, or use the "Con-

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